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AUTHOR Johnson, Olin Chester
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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the role of the Black church in American history. The Black church is portrayed as an institution through which Blacks have worked to achieve social, economic, and political equality as well as spiritual guidance and social interaction. In the Colonial era the dominant purpose of having Blacks attend church was to condition them for their life in slavery. Yet after the Revolutionary War, Blacks in the north began to form their own churches to avoid the segregation and discrimination of white churches. Prior to the Civil War, the Black church was slowed considerably by whites fearing the Black church would incite slave revolts. After the Civil War and during the late 19th century, the Black church continued its fight against white discrimination and served as a center for educational activities. Throughout the 20th century, the theme of the Black church has been civil rights for all Blacks. The 1960's and 1970's have seen the church actively increasing community involvement, and social and economic programs for Black Communities. Blacks turned to the church for leadership because they were severely separated from other social, political, and economic areas of American life. (Author/DE)

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THE BLACK CHURCH IN AMERICA

by Olin Chester Johnson

The Black Church in America represents a unique institution through which Blacks have worked to achieve social, economic and political strength. From the Revolutionary War Period to the present era, Blacks have used the church not only for spiritual guidance and social interaction, but also for an instrument to help guide them to freedom, equality and justice. The church gave Blacks a place in which to release their psychological burdens originating from social, political and economic discrimination placed upon them by a white society. They utilized the church not only for spiritual guidance, but for planning and initiating activities that would help them achieve their full human rights. Therefore, the Black Church seems to be the most important Black institution that continued to grow and prosper despite centuries of abuse and attack upon it and its people by various elements in our society.

Before the Revolutionary War of 1776, Black slaves in America attended church with their masters. They usually were segregated from whites and assembled in the rear of the church. Slaves were taken to church for several reasons. Foremost, their masters wanted to keep a watchful eye on them for slaves were known to revolt against their masters and to plan escapes for their freedom. Probably equally important for slave attendance in church was the white preachers' intent of "brainwashing" slaves into believing that slavery was their God given position and condition for life. White ministers displayed this idea by using and interpreting the Bible in an effort to make slaves obedient and trustworthy to their masters. Ministers often instructed Black slaves to obey their masters and to work hard and conscientiously if they desired to reach heaven. So, the dominant purpose of having Blacks attend church during this period was to condition them for their life in slavery.

In the North before the Revolutionary War, Blacks had some freedom in attending white churches of their choice. Usually their numbers were small and they integrated freely among the white members. However, as their numbers increased, they were segregated in the rear or gallery of the church. Often, when they attempted to attend white churches, they were dismissed altogether.

During and after the Revolutionary War, Black churches were started in the North, and in some instances, southern states. In most cases these churches were organized by free Blacks. The denominations were usually Baptist or Methodist because these seem to best meet the emotional and psychological needs of Blacks. One of the first Baptist churches was founded by Reverend George Liele in 1779 in Savannah and when he left for Jamaica, Reverend Andrew Bryan continued his work despite opposition from whites. In the North where Blacks had considerable freedom in establishing churches, and in some instances were forced to do so because of segregation laws. Richard Allen and Absolom Jones founded the Bethel African Methodist Church in Philadelphia in 1787 when they were told to leave the St. Georges Church after refusing to worship in the rear of the church. They were first allowed to integrate among the white members, until the numbers of Blacks increased to the point where the trustees felt compelled to order all Blacks to the gallery and rear of the church.

As these forces of segregations and discrimination against Blacks in churches spread throughout the North, Blacks left to form and establish their own places of worship. In 1809 the Reverend Burrows and other Blacks established a Baptist church in Philadelphia after being dismissed from a white congregation. Also, in 1809 Reverend Thomas Paul organized a Baptist church for Blacks in Boston. He also helped to establish the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. The Reverend Morris Brown in 1817, organized a Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina which by 1819 had over one thousand members. During this post-revolutionary period the

Methodist and Baptist denominations spread quickly throughout the North and South as Blacks sought a release from their miseries of plantation life.

Between 1820 and 1855 the activity of the Black church was slowed considerably by whites because of numerous slave revolts. Most outstanding was the Denmark Vesey Revolt of 1822 and the Nat Turner Revolt of 1831. Nat Turner was a self-ordained minister who often stirred the emotions of Blacks regarding the slave system. In this period also, we have the peak of the abolitionist movement. Abolitionists such as Harriet Tubman, Charles Remond, Frederick Douglass, William Garrison, David Walker and many others were writing and speaking about the evil conditions of slavery. Many of these people participated in helping slaves escape to northern states where slavery was forbidden. All of these activities on the part of Blacks and some abolitionists led whites to distrust and suppress the activities of the Black church. Black preachers, in general, were not allowed to preach during this period of slave rebellion for fear that they would start slave revolts. Still, however, the Black church and Black ministers played an important role in aiding fugitive slaves and establishing channels of communication between anti-slavery groups and plantation slaves.

In the Civic War Period the Black church took on many responsibilities which aided and supported the Blacks' fight for freedom. The Bible was used by ministers and other Black leaders to teach Blacks the fundamentals of reading and writing. The church also grew as a powerful instrument in helping Blacks move to free northern states. Most Black ministers such as Reverend Alexander Crummell and Reverend Daniel Payne would use every available opportunity, in and out of church, to speak about the freedom, equality and justice for all Blacks. Whites in the South, therefore, tried to be very observant of the religious activities of Blacks. Black congregations in the North lent support to slaves by hiding them and by setting fugitive escape stations, by going South to give physical aid and also by

giving material and financial aid. Men such as Reverend Henry Garnet lectured and spoke out against slavery in many northern states and in England. Other Black leaders who sought to further the cause of freedom included Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, who often used the church to deliver their freedom messages. In both the North and South, the Black church aided in the recruitment of Black soldiers.

The Black church in the Post-Civil War and Reconstruction Period gave valuable service to freed men and the Union in many ways. Generally, this is true of churches in the North and South. For three freed men, the Black church served as a center for educational activities and led all efforts in educating Blacks. Local community schools were also started through initial work of churches. The church served as a training ground for Black organizations and businesses. It aided in finding employment and living quarters for freed men. It gave valuable assistance in providing medical care for Blacks. One of the most important functions of the Black church during this time was developing Blacks for leadership positions in the community.

The Baptists and Methodists took the lead in establishing schools and centers of learning for Blacks. Baptists established Shaw University at Raleigh in 1865; Roger Williams at Nashville, and Morehouse at Atlanta in 1867; Leland at New Orleans in 1869 and Benedict at Columbia in 1871. The Methodists established Walden at Nashville in 1865; Morgan at Baltimore in 1867; Claflin at Orangeburg in 1869, and Clark at Atlanta in 1870. Many other schools for freed men were established during the Reconstruction Period by other denominations and organizations. The American Missionary Association established Trinity at Athens, Alabama; Fisk at Nashville in 1866; and Talladega in Alabama in 1867, among many others. The Presbyterians established Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1854 and the Congregationists helped establish Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1867. Education was seen by most denominations as the number one need for Blacks during this period.

Organizations that were formed by Black laymen during Reconstruction included fraternities, lodges and masons, all of which helped to provide social and economic needs of Blacks.

After the Reconstruction years, southern state legislatures passed and enforced "Black Codes" which severely limited the social, economic and political life of Blacks. However, the Black church became one of the first Black institutions to protest and fight against segregation and discrimination. From 1880 to about 1925 the church met powerful opposition from other American institutions. Especially noteworthy were southern laws, observed in every southern state, which stripped Blacks of all their human rights. For the most part during these years, the Black church was hindered by the political actions of legislatures.

In the 1920's and 1930's, the Black church along with the National Association for Colored Peoples, fought hard against the lynchings of Blacks, mainly in southern states. Also, churches served as centers for feeding and clothing Blacks during the depression years. The Reverend Adam C. Powell led a march on New York's City Hall for Black relief during the depression.

Civil Rights for all Blacks was the theme of the Black church from World War II throughout the 1960's. Protests were numerous against segregation and discrimination of Blacks in the armed services, employment, public facilities, housing, schools, voting and other economic, social and political areas.

Ebeneezer Baptist Church in Georgia, under the leadership of Dr. Martin L. King, led strong and successful fights against many forms of segregation and discrimination in the South. Organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.) gained their strength under Dr.King's direction. These organizations led marches, speeches, boycotts and other forms of protests to change discrimination and segregation policies that institutions displayed against Blacks.

Church activity in the 1960's and 1970's have centered around increased community involvement and service. One of the most outstanding examples of this movement is the Opportunity Industrial Center (O.I.C.), which was developed by the members of Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia under the leadership of Reverend Leon Sullivan. The Opportunity Industrial Center provides training for Blacks in a variety of skills and trades. Through private contributions and federal funding, O.I.C. has established centers throughout the United States and in other parts of the world.

Reverend Leon Sullivan's O.I.C. movement gave Black congregations throughout the United States the pride and motivation to develop social and economic programs in Black communities in an effort to aid the masses of poor people. These programs cover areas in economics, politics, education, housing, health and medical care, recreation and employment. The Black Muslims is another religious group that has made important achievements in the area of Black economics development. This group, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad,has established Black enterprises that include supermarkets, department stores, clothing industries, restaurants and housing units. The success of the Black Muslims has been promoted mostly through the efforts of impoverished Blacks and former Black convicts. These programs and others similar in nature have given tremendous help and aid to millions of Blacks in America. However, there is still much work to be done in providing programs that will reach the masses of Blacks who continue to live in substandard human conditions in large urban centers.

Throughout American history, the Black church has represented spiritual and human cooperation and achievement among Blacks. It has represented to Blacks the concept of group ownership. Blacks turned to the church for self-expression, direction, recognition and leadership because they were severely separated from other social, political and economic areas of American life.

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